



Shadows of slavery

Refractions of the past, challenges of the present



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Alice Bellagamba, Marco Gardini and Laura Menin (eds)

The problem of “working for someone”: debt, dependence and labour exploitation in Chad

Precolonial elites used to enslave the farmers of rural Chad, now they hold them in debt bondage. How much has changed, how much has not?

Valerio Colosio

Exploitation in the agricultural sector usually results from the subordinate position of workers engaged as farmhands or sharecroppers. Their weak bargaining position vis-à-vis land owners prevents them from fighting back against low salaries or unequally shared harvest revenues. This does not mean, however, that a farmer is secure when he owns the land he farms. He is not. Small farmers' dependence on agricultural cycles force them to borrow money to buy inputs at the beginning of the seeding season and, consequently, to quickly sell the crops after the harvest – when the prices are lower – to repay the debt. This dynamic has been described in various African contexts where small farmers are engaged, with urging from the state, in farming cash crops like cocoa or coffee.

In this article I want to tackle a case where the weakness of farmers towards traders puts them in positions of extreme exploitation, namely the debt contracted by farmers producing cereals in the Guéra region of central Chad. Here farmers are pressed to take loans from the traders of their main crop, often at such high interest rates that they become locked into debt and obliged to give most if not all the harvest away to service that debt. In this situation, the farmer maintains ownership over the land he farms but loses control of its products.

Cereal harvest and debt in central Chad

The Guéra region is a mountainous area in central Chad that has been inhabited by scattered groups of non-Muslim farmers for centuries. The target of slavers' raids in former times, the people of the

Guéra region were brought under the ‘protection’ of the colonial government in the first decade of the twentieth century, only to then be forced to farm the land to pay for a new head tax. This crafted a new economic system where precolonial elites took control of trade, extracting surplus from agricultural production by putting local small holder farmers in debt to them.

This dynamic is reported across the Sahel in locations where the climate and agriculture cycle lend themselves to millet and sorghum farming. Traders buy huge amounts of cereals after the harvest, when the price is low. They keep the cereals in their stores and then sell them in the hungry season. By that point the farmers are running out of cereals themselves, and the traders offer to replenish their stocks in exchange for (much greater amounts of) cereal from the next harvest. In this way the farmer loses a big part of his harvest, making it likely that he will be more vulnerable the following year and keeping him trapped in a relationship of dependence with the traders.

Working for someone: local perception of freedom and labour in Guéra

I heard about the issues related to the cereal loans before going to Guéra, while talking with leaders of local associations in N’Djamena, Chad’s capital. Humanitarian organisations are creating, in many Sahelian countries, a network of ‘communitarian cereal banks’ in a bid to break the debt trap and to guarantee food security for small-hold farmers. These organisations are set up to lend cereals at a low interest rate in the hungry season.

The workers in these associations liken the situation facing farmers to some forms of slave labour that took place across Chad prior to the twentieth century. There are, however, some peculiarities in contemporary Guéra region. For example, the religious divide of the slave times – where non-Muslim communities were prey for neighbouring Muslim sultanates – no longer holds. Both the traders and the farmers

are now Muslim. Moreover, farmers are not stigmatised as a low social class, as happens elsewhere in the Sahel to groups labelled as slave-descendants or to blacksmiths in the Guéra.

Interestingly, while NGO workers in N'Djamena chose to emphasise the ruthlessness of the traders and the powerlessness farmers, the farmers themselves seemed more concerned about the need to “work for someone else” to secure their own subsistence, than about the morality of the traders. In the farmers’ stories, falling in the debt trap is described as a sort of accident, the main drawback of which is to concentrate household manpower on activities “for someone else”. One farmer told me that he had a bad harvest that year and was aware that he would not have enough sorghum in his granary for the hungry season.

For sure, at a certain point I will need to leave the village and work for someone else, but this makes everything difficult. I will have less time to prepare my field for the next harvest and I risk having another bad harvest. Therefore, many people ask loan to the traders, despite the bad rates they offer. They try to avoid working for someone else, hence they ask them (for) enough cereals to remain in the village and prepare their field. But then when they must give back the harvest to the traders, they realise they also worked for someone else.

Cereals are the only wealth of farmers: they are stored to guarantee the survival of the household and used in the local economy as cash. Once the granary is filled, the farmer can sell the exceeding cereals and other crops (sesame, peanuts, tomatoes, okra). If the harvest is not enough, some household members need to move from the village and look for a temporary job. Usually this task is entrusted to youths and women, whose subordinate position in the domestic sphere is considered fitter for some seasonal occupations (i.e. brick production, migration to the city, petty trades). Furthermore, if the head of the household becomes

involved in such activities the family will likely face problems in preparing the fields the following year. Where that might be necessary, local farmers may prefer to ask for a loan and remain in the village, rather than “work for someone else” and start the farming late. As undesirable as that is, it still seems to happen frequently.

The presence of history

In the Guéra the traders are locally associated with ‘Arabs’ – a word used to indicate a vast array of nomadic groups of Arab descent who seasonally migrate across central Chad with their cattle. Although the majority of ‘Arabs’ base their livelihood on herding, many also serve as traders. The vast social networks they have created through their transhumance facilitates their careers as traders, to the point that Arab and trader are almost synonymous.

The relationship between Arab and local farmer have been ambiguous over the time. Most Guéra villages have “their own Arabs”, regularly bringing their cattle to graze and fertilise the fields, as well as to exchange dairy products with agricultural products. However, in many other cases, before the colonial government asserted control over the territory herders periodically attacked farmers’ villages to capture captives and steal cereals.

The traders controlling the cereal trade are often former herders, or members of herders’ families who sell some cattle to start their activities. Despite frequent cases of peaceful coexistence, I perceived among farmers a feeling of weakness toward them. The Arabs decide the prices at the market, and at times allow their cattle to trample and eat some of the farmers’ crops. If a fine is levied its impact for the herder is much lower than the loss of the harvest is for the farmer. These traders’ livelihoods do not depend on fragile capital – cereal – that needs to be reproduced each year and that can be quickly destroyed. They are also the only local actors with easy access to credit, thanks to the value of their cattle.

Another farmer, who is actively involved in the cereal bank project, explained the situation using both past and present to form his narrative:

Local people were totally subjugated by the Arabs, who built more than 60 cereal storages in the forest, collecting all the cereals farmed by the people. The nomadic used to do this to stock their cereal, but in this case, they (are) doing it just to act as usurers with the local people.

The system is slowly changing. Farmers told me the exploitation related to cereal debt has reduced over the past ten years, as humanitarian organisations and the state are offering some alternative routes to survival in the hungry season. The same cannot be said for the relationship between farmers and traders, which remain relatively static: borrowing cereal from a trader is considered a bad but rational option in a context where the state is not able to impose rules on traders and farmers are too weak to challenge contemporary power relations. A bad harvest is a likely event and could easily lead them into a debt trap. Repaying debt to traders is a terrible option, but sometimes loans are the only alternative to migration, and the impact of migration on small-hold farmers is also very harsh.

This collection is an outcome of five years of collective research and discussion aimed at bringing the legacies of nineteenth century enslavement together with examples of contemporary bondage and exploitation that may or may not fall under the rubric of ‘modern slavery’. It demonstrates one way of creating a contextually balanced understanding of how the past and present connect with each other, and do not. It interrogates, in the first place, which past matters in specific situations: is it the centuries-long past of the Atlantic slave trade, or the nineteenth century histories of regional and interregional enslavement? All together, these contributions ‘descend’ into the everyday worlds of people who live the consequences of historical slave systems or who happen to find themselves ‘trapped’ in novel forms of socio-political inequality, racism, labour exploitation and sexual and moral violence.

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